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AUTHOR Abdal-Haqq, Ismat
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ABSTRACT

This Digest examines violence in team sports and how manifestations of violence reflect the attitudes and behavior of players, coaches, and fans. Three theoretical explanations of sports violence are discussed--the biological theory, the psychological theory, and the social learning theory. The pressures of competitive sports on children are noted. The responsibilities of coaches, physical educators, and parents in curbing violence in youth sports are briefly discussed. (JD)

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VIOLENCE IN SPORTS

ERIC Digest 1-89

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON TEACHER EDUCATION

ERIC DIGEST EDO-SP 1-89

Violence in Sports

Manifestations of Violence in Sports

Sports violence can be defined as behavior which causes harm, occurs outside of the rules of the sport, and is unrelated to the competitive objectives of the sport (Terry and Jackson, p. 2). Leonard (p. 165) identifies two forms of aggression in sports. Instrumental aggression is non-emotional and task-oriented. Reactive aggression has an underlying emotional component, with harm as its goal. Violence is an outcome of reactive aggression.

An increase in both frequency and seriousness of acts of violence has been well documented. Violence is most prevalent in team contact sports, such as ice hockey, football, and rugby. While most occurrences of violence emanate from players, others, including coaches, parents, fans, and the media, also contribute to what has been described as an epidemic of violence in sports today (Leonard, p. 166).

Considerable research has been done on spectator violence. A central issue is whether fans incite player violence or reflect it (Debenedotte, p. 207). The evidence is inconclusive. Spectators do take cues from players, coaches, cheerleaders, and one another. Spectators often derive a sense of social identity and self-esteem from a team. Emulation of favorite players is an element of this identification. Group solidarity with players and coaches leads to a view of opposing teams as enemies and fosters hostility towards the "outgroup" and, by extension, its supporters, geographical locale, ethnic group, and perceived social class (Lee, p. 45).

Mass media also contribute to the acceptability of sports. Leonard (p. 166) maintains that the media occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand it affords ample exposure to sports-related violence via television, magazines, newspapers, and radio, thus providing numerous examples to children who may imitate such behavior. It glamorizes players, often the most controversial and aggressive ones. Its commentary is laced with descriptions suggestive of combat, linking excitement to violent action. On the other hand, the exposure given to sports violence by the media has stimulated increased efforts to control and prevent such behavior.

Theoretical Explanations of Sports Violence

There are three major theories that seek to explain violent aggression in sports (Terry and Jackson, p. 27; Leonard, pp. 170-71). The biological theory, proposed most notably by Nobel prize winner Konrad Lorenz, sees aggression as a basic, inherent human characteristic. Within this context, sports is seen as a socially acceptable way to discharge built-up aggression, a safety valve.

The psychological theory states that aggression is caused by frustration; it is situational. Frustration results when one's efforts to reach a particular goal are blocked (Leonard, p. 170). In sports, frustration can be caused by questionable calls by officials, failure to make a particular play, injuries that interfere with optimum performance, heckling from spectators, or taunts by coaches or players.

The social learning theory has received the most empirical verification (Leonard, p. 171) and maintains that aggressive behavior is learned through modeling and reinforced by rewards and punishments. Young athletes take sports heroes as role models and imitate their behavior. Parents, coaches and teammates are also models who may demonstrate support for an aggressive style of play.

According to Terry and Jackson (p. 30), reinforcement for acts of violence may come from three sources: (a) the athlete's immediate reference group—coaches, teammates, family, friends; (b) structure of the game and implementation of rules by officials and governing bodies; (c) attitudes of fans, media, courts, and society. Reinforcement may take the form of rewards, such as praise, trophies, starting position, respect of friends and family. Vicarious reinforcement may be derived from seeing professional players lionized and paid huge salaries, in spite of, or because of, their aggressive style of play (Leonard, p. 171). Players who don't display the desired degree of aggressiveness may receive negative reinforcement through criticism from parents and coaches, lack of playing time, harassment by teammates, opponents, or spectators.

These theories provide a basis for interventions that may curb excessive aggression, especially among young athletes. Terry and Jackson (p. 35) suggest that socialization forces, particularly reinforcement, offer the best focus for intervention. In addition, psychological forces can be addressed by modifying or controlling situations that produce frustration.

Children's Involvement in Sports

Ideally children's participation in team sports should be fun, contribute to their physical development and well-being, help to develop social skills, and promote a desire for continued involvement with physical activity. The objective of physical education in schools should be to encourage development of appropriate exercise habits, with emphasis on the recreational aspects of physical activities (Roskosz, p. 7).

Unfortunately, compelling evidence suggests that, for many children, the pressures associated with sports produce low self-esteem, excessive anxiety, and aggressive behavior. Children may eventually experience "sports burnout" and develop a lifelong avoidance of physical activity (Hellstedt, p. 60, 62).

In Hellstedt's opinion (p. 62), these negative outcomes of sports involvement are caused by adults, particularly parents and coaches. Lip-service is paid to sportsmanship and having fun, but rewards are reserved for winning. Often, encouragement to pursue victory is accompanied by direct and indirect signals that aggressive behavior is acceptable to achieve it. Hellstedt also

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suggests that anxiety about winning impedes performance and makes players more susceptible to injury. Physicians have noticed an increase in sports-related injuries in children (Hellstedt, p. 59).

What Can Coaches and Physical Educators Do to Curb Violence in Youth Sports?

Physical educators and coaches are in a key position to lay the groundwork for positive attitudes in sports. Guidelines for teaching children to shun violent behavior in sports include:

(a) Put sports in perspective. Coaches should not emphasize winning at all cost. Enjoyment and the development of individual skills should be the objective. Coaches should be alert to and praise improvement. Athletic performance should not be equated with personal worth (Coakley, p. 106). Players should not be encouraged or allowed to play when injured or ill, as a demonstration of stoic virtue.

(b) Stress participation. Hellstedt (p. 70) cites studies which show that many children 9-14 drop out of sports because they spend too much time on the bench and not enough on the field. They perceive themselves as unsuccessful because their level of performance doesn't earn them more playing time. A study of young male athletes indicated that 90% would rather have an opportunity to play on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team.

(c) Present positive role models. Sports violence is most prevalent in professional sports. Coaches should avoid symbolic associations with professional teams—e.g. names, logos. They should not model their own coaching techniques on those of professional coaches (Coakley, pp. 107-8). Weiser and Love (p. 5) recommend that school coaches implement strategies to foster feelings of team ownership among players, replacing the traditional hierarchy—authoritarian coach, submissive players—that governs the coach-player relationship in professional sports. Encourage input, permit participation in decision-making, and listen to player feedback. Feelings of team ownership foster team cohesiveness, which in turn leads to better performance.

(d) Integrate values-oriented intervention strategies into the curriculum. Waldzilak cites a number of intervention strategies, utilizing Kohlberg's moral development model and social learning theories, which have been shown to produce improvement or modification of behavior, moral reasoning and perceptions of sportsmanship (Wandzilak et al., p. 14). Teachers and coaches should commit themselves to actively teaching positive sports-related values, and devise curricula that do so.

(e) Involve parents. As the earliest and potentially the most influential role models, parents can have a critical impact on a child's attitudes towards sports. Physical educators and coaches should inform parents of curricular activities and goals, alert them to signs of anxiety or aggressive behavior, encourage positive attitudes toward competition and physical activity, and promote realistic expectations for performance (Hellstedt, pp. 69-70).

References

Those references identified with an EJ number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles should be available at most research libraries. For a list of ERIC collections in your area or for information on submitting documents to ERIC, contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 293-2450. (References identified with an asterisk had not been assigned EJ numbers at the time of publication of this digest.)

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Mary E. Dilworth, Director
Liane Summerfield, Associate Director HPRD
Ismat Abdal-Haqq, Writer

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